

****ATTENTION****

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Conservation of

OWLS

burrowing owl

In the State of Washington

Nine species of owls occur regularly in Washington. Their common names are: barn, burrowing, great horned, long-eared, pygmy, saw-whet, screech, short-eared, and spotted owls. In addition, the great gray, hawk-owl, and snowy owls are uncommon winter visitors from the north, and there are five records of the rare flammulated owl. Owls are easily recognized by their large heads, big eyes, neckless appearance, and noiseless flight, which are characteristic of this group.

The burrowing and short-eared owls are well-known, since they are active in daylight hours, sharing this trait with the rarer hawk-owl and snowy owl. The great horned owl is frequently seen in trees during the day. The others are seldom seen, since they hunt their prey by night and spend the day in heavy cover. Thus, few people realize that, except for the burrowing and long-eared (east of the Cascades) and spotted (west of the Cascades), the owls are widely distributed in the State.

Washington owls range in size from the pygmy owl, which is smaller than a robin, to the great gray, which may reach a length of 30 inches with a wing spread of five feet.

HABITAT NEEDS

Food. Owls eat no seeds or other vegetable matter. Their food consists entirely of animals such as birds, crayfish, frogs, insects, lizards, small mammals, and snakes. Fish are eaten by great horned and screech owls, but damage to fish populations is negligible.

Most of the smaller owls prefer insects; the larger ones prey heavily on mice and other small mammals.

A few birds are taken by all of our owls, but this usually is a minor item in their diet. In any case, the few birds they catch cannot be missed.

The food habits of owls make them highly beneficial to the interests of farmers and sportsmen, and they should be protected and encouraged at all times. A possible exception is the great horned owl, which is often a nuisance around poultry yards, and sometimes preys on game birds during severe winters. This damage could be alleviated by providing the birds with good escape cover.

Nesting. Pygmy, saw-whet, and screech owls like to nest in old woodpecker holes and other tree cavities; larger hollow trees are used by barn and spotted owls. Old magpie nests are preferred by the long-eared owl, while the great horned owl likes crow or hawk nests. The barn, great horned, and spotted owls occasionally nest on cliffs. The barn owl also frequently nests in old buildings. The short-eared owl selects a site on the ground or in a depression such as an old post hole, while the burrowing owl goes underground in an unused badger or ground squirrel burrow. Screech owls will also nest in birdhouses.

Calls. Owls are more often heard than seen. Their calls, most commonly given in the morning and evening twilight, range from the low hoot of the great horned owl to the quavering whistle of the screech owl. The little saw-whet owl derives its name from its call, which sounds like a saw being filed. Other owls emit a variety of wails, shrieks, coos, cackles, and hisses.

All owls are protected by law in Washington. They may be legally killed only while in the act of pursuing or killing domestic fowl or game birds. Many farmers, recognizing their value on the farm, add to this protection by cautioning hunters not to shoot them and by protecting their nesting sites, which are often used year after year.



great horned owl